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LITTLE BROTHER OF THE MOUNTAINS

BY WINIFRED KIRKLAND

HALF an hour ago Mabel, my little mountain chum, went away to the mission boarding school. I watched the old horse and the old buggy jolt over the rocks and disappear into the green gloom of rhododendron, and I knew that a new life was beginning for Mabel. It is as if you should catch a little wild wood sprite to cage and school her. I wonder whether her stars and her dreams and her mountain mother might not have been the better teachers. Last night Ma Duncan and I sat long on the porch steps while the evening stole softly down upon the three peaks of Craggy. Was it because in the morning the "least one" of her eight was to go forth from her home that Ma Duncan told me so much about her little boy who died twenty years ago, her second son?

With what immortal persistence little dead children live in a mother's memory, so that to me, her friend, little Chris moves as vividly as any of the small brown mountain boys whose bare feet to-day pad shyly beside mine along some hidden mountain trail! I seem to see him flashing at his mother's side in the big dusky kitchen, or through brown and green woodways, for "he was always with me, except when he'd be off in the fields a-workin' with his brother and his daddy. He was always such a little worker, and him only goin' on ten when he died. He wore his little body out, that's what he done!"

She tells me of his quick mind, of his singing, of his story-spinning. "There was somethin' about him folks always felt, somethin' different, that made everybody notice him. Folks would stop him in the road to talk to him, and they'd always want him to tell 'em stories. He'd start right in and tell, like it was real and in such grand words, things he'd make up as if they'd happened to him in the woods, things he'd 'magine he saw." She dreams on, "Once in a while I see folks that has eyes

like little Chris's, so brown and shinin'. I wish you could have seen his eyes. The old folks always told me I'd never raise him. He was too good for this world and too good for the rest of us."

The mountain mystery of endlessly whispering woods is all about us. Where else should people dream dreams and see visions, and hear the far cries of mystery? "Did I ever tell you the dream I had about him 'fore ever he was sick? I dreamed him and me was standin' yonder at that gate, and lookin' down at the ford below, shinin' with the sunset. Just then I saw right down there by the creek, a whole company of little soldiers. No bigger than little Chris they was, and all dressed in blue uniforms and all goin' through the movements with their rifles, like they was practicin'. While we was watchin' 'em, they riz right up in the air toward us; until they was right above our heads, still goin' through all the movements. And little Chris says, 'Ma, I can go with them little soldiers,' and right then he riz up in the air, too, and he went on with them, and left me a-standin' there alone until I couldn't see 'em no more."

Certain incidents enshrine him. He finds his untaught mother struggling to read Dinwiddie's sermons, and the mite of eight takes the book from her, and wrestles with it until he can read and explain it to her. "And he understood all the meanin' of it just as plain!" Again he is trudging a narrow road with the sister two years older, when some loose horses come tearing down upon them. He quickly makes his sister climb the fence, but when she cries to him to follow he stands staunch, "'Don't you know I must take care of my sister?' is what he said,—Nora, she's told me about it a-many a time, how she looked back and saw him standin' there plumb in the middle of the road, a-pickin' up rocks to throw at them horses, and, what do you think, he stood there a-throwin' rocks until he turned 'em back, and him so small!"

The story of the last six months sounds Hardy-esque in the fatality of the small circumstances that prevent the coming of the doctor. "It was at Christmas first I noticed. He *would* walk down to the station to get his Christmas presents,"—a matter of ten rough miles for a child who had a secret heart disease,—"It was after that his feet swelled, and I said to Daddy, 'Little

Chris ain't well,' and to git the doctor, but Daddy he said for me not to worry and to keep on a-bathin' his feet. And it's true the child wasn't sick, so as men-folks could tell it. And he got better of that time. Along about in April I began to see how a white streak would come across his forehead, and again I says to Daddy, 'Little Chris ain't well. Don't take him into the fields to work no more.' But little Chris he would be a-doin' wherever there was work to do. But he knowed. Oh, from the first I know he knowed!"

Still the tale of the doctor not brought, of passing travelers promising to tell him there was an ailing child up this way, and then forgetting, until when at last the doctor came, "Old Doctor Russell it was who'd always known me, and when he saw little Chris, and listened at his heart, he just took him in his arms and cried. Little Chris was still runnin' around the house then, but pretty soon he had to quit, and toward the end of June he went. But he'd say to me, 'don't cry, Ma, don't shed a tear for me. It's easier for you I should be took from you this way when I'm small than that I should be torn from you, when I'm a man, to go away to the cruel war that's a-comin'.' Wasn't it strange he should say that, and there was no talk of any war then anywhere!"

We are silent, looking off to those watchful turrets of old Craggy. I am thinking of all mothers everywhere, who always must one day give up their babies, sometimes to death, sometimes to life. Long ago little Chris went away into the secret country, and now Mabel—like him, more her mother's comrade than any of the other children—must go away into the land of life; which of the two, when the mother's pilgrimage draws to its end, shall seem closer to her? After a long pause, Chris's mother says, questioning the steadfast peaks over which the pale rain-mist is brooding, "The future life and the Judgment Day and all that, don't nobody know nothin' 'bout that really," and again, "it's queer what a body'll go through in a life, and still keep right on as if nothin' had ever happened."

Then pondering the mystery of living as she had pondered the mystery of death, "I reckon we got to keep on. The Lord will forgive us everythin' but to quit tryin'!"

But someone inside is restless, perhaps with the low hum of

our voices, or perhaps in the father's heart, too, burns a portrait of the dead child whose name I have never heard him mention. God alone knows whether men do not suffer as much as mothers do. Yet how heavy-thudding on the porch are the feet that make us break off talking, Chris's mother and I! The sharp yet wordless interruption reminds me of Robert Frost's *Home Burial*, and makes me ponder the mystery of marriage and of motherhood.

I have sometimes heard Ma Duncan exclaim in wonder, "There's some says there ain't no God!" and, thinking of little Chris, I share that puzzlement, for on what hypothesis except a God can one account for the strange grafting of unearthly loveliness on heavy earth-stock, or explain the little singing soul who was "too good for the rest of us"?

WINIFRED KIRKLAND.